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‘Africa’s Displaced People’

*U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04), Chairman
Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Excerpts of remarks
July 9, 2015*

Last year, nearly 60 million people were displaced worldwide. In fact, one out of every 122 people on Earth today is either a refugee, internally displaced in their home country or seeking asylum in another country.

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are more than 15 million displaced people. Of that total, 3.7 million are refugees and 11.4 million are internally displaced. These disruptions of normal life in Africa are caused by conflicts such as in Somalia, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burundi, Western Sahara and elsewhere. These disruptions not only affect those who are displaced, but also the people in whose communities these displaced people are relocated.

African refugees and internally displaced people face numerous issues—from security in the places in which they seek refuge, to death and mayhem trying to reach places of refuge, to conflict with surrounding populations to warehousing that consigns generations to be born and live in foreign countries.

Today’s hearing will examine the various issues displaced people face and the U.S. response to these conditions in order to determine the effectiveness of our government’s efforts to help and to determine whether course corrections are necessary.

The terrible plight of African refugees has been much in the news in recent months because of the death of thousands trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean Sea and attacks on refugees in South Africa reportedly caused by xenophobia.

On the South African case, I sent two members of my staff to southern Africa last month to look into the incidents of violence against refugees in South Africa. What they found was appalling. Despite a very generous set of laws and programs to enable immigration into South Africa, refugees were often refused medical service at hospitals that supposedly offer free medical care to all people.

Apparently, no matter what the law in South Africa says, staff who screen patients often simply refuse to allow people they consider foreigners to receive medical care. According to refugees who spoke with my staff, this has meant that refugee women have had to give birth on the floor of hospitals while hospital staff refused to provide services.

As for those refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean to seek sanctuary in Europe, more than 1,800 people have died making that trip this year as of early June. On the cover of the April 25th issue of The Economist magazine, the failure of the nations of Europe to devise a workable, humane policy toward those fleeing to their continent was described as “a moral and political disgrace.”

Many of the refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean are Eritreans, who also have fled persecution and repression at home through the Gulf of Aden and also through the Sinai Peninsula, where they are often at the mercy of ruthless Bedouin groups, who traffic them or hold them for ransom. Eritrea is a closed society, so our knowledge of conditions there comes mostly from refugees, but one has to ask how bad must conditions there be if so many Eritreans are willing to risk their lives and well-being to find refuge almost anywhere else?

Unresolved conflicts have forced many refugees to experience protracted stays in foreign countries. For example, refugees have not only had children but also grandchildren in camps in Kenya and Algeria. After more than two decades, the situation in Somalia remains unresolved, and Somali refugees are unable to resume their lives in their homeland. Yet they face an increasingly hostile Kenyan environment in which the government is unwilling to allow Somalis to establish financial independence outside refugee camps.

In Algeria, Sahrawis, refugees from the Western Sahara territory under the control of Morocco, have lived in camps in western Algeria since being chased out of the territory by the advance of hundreds of thousands of Moroccans in 1975. The Government of Algeria not only provides a home for the Sahrawis, but also supplies access to free education and health care. Still, income-generating activities by Sahrawis are discouraged to prevent competition with local Algerians.

Internally displaced persons also face serious challenges. In Nigeria, for example, more than 1.5 million people from northeastern Nigeria have fled attacks by Boko Haram and resulting Nigerian military activities. However, Nigeria is a patchwork of 36 states whose creation over the years has inflamed ethnic and religious tensions as state majorities became minorities suddenly. The Nigerian IDPs are generally living in communities rather than camps. The longer they remain in their current areas, the greater the chance their presence will inflame new unrest as the ethnic and religious balance in their new areas is again changed abruptly.

The United States and the rest of the international community face serious challenges in addressing the displacement of so many people. According to U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, the “international response capacities are overstretched by the unprecedented rise in global forced displacement.” We must carefully consider the U.S. role in meeting the increasing challenge of Africa’s displaced people, taking into consideration our moral imperative to help those in need, as well as strategic interests in preventing the kind of neglect that makes terrorist recruitment among displaced people easier than it should be.